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A conversation with Richard Neustadt, professor of public administration at Harvard and authority on presidential power. He and Ernest May are authors of a new book, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers*

## When history should lead the way

I wish government leaders made better use of history in decision making, but they rarely do. They are not systematic in their approach. In looking at Nicaragua, for example, instead of asking what past circumstances seem parallel, many tend simply to draw an analogy with Vietnam. Well, it is not analogous except in terms of the possible domestic impact.

A more systematic method means asking questions such as: "When in the past have we tried to get rid of regimes?" There are a number of cases—none precisely like Nicaragua's. Somewhat comparable were our efforts to overturn Castro's government. That experience tells you a lot of things *not* to do in Nicaragua. We tried for years to get rid of Castro through covert activities and by supporting exiles at the Bay of Pigs. The *contra* operation is a longer-run undertaking than the Bay of Pigs. Still, the fact that the efforts in Cuba did not work suggests that we ought to be thinking about what's next in Nicaragua if the *contras* fail. That's the burning question that emerges from the analogy, but I haven't heard any discussion during the current debate—just charges and denials.

Taking analogies from the past and then running through the likenesses to and differences with the current situation can be helpful to policymakers. But, instead, they tend to draw on history to justify actions—grabbing at analogies that support their position.

### Relying on analogies can 'lead you astray'

Even a systematic use of analogies is not always helpful, and that's the case in the Libyan situation. While there have been occasions in the past when America insisted on freedom of innocent passage, these confrontations did not involve small nations armed the way Libya is with a proclaimed international terrorist network for use in retaliation. So we need to look at the situation in terms of its own history: Relying on analogies is likely to lead you astray.

The wrong historical analogy can cover your vision and turn you in the wrong direction. A case in point occurred in 1975 when a U.S. ship, the *Mayaguez*, was seized by the Cambodians. President Gerald Ford immediately grabbed on to an analogy with the intelligence ship *Pueblo*, seized by the North Koreans seven years earlier. What stuck in his mind was that the captain and crew of the *Pueblo* were kept in prison for 11 months. So his impulse was to rescue the people on the *Mayaguez* right away. He put an enormous amount of pressure on the military to act at once, even though they wanted an extra day's time. The result was a botched-up rescue mission.

History was used more effectively by the Kennedy administration in the Cuban missile crisis. The President wanted to know when the Russians had done anything this uncautious before and how a given action might look to them given their frame of reference. This was a case of going beyond analogies and trying to figure out the rele-



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vant history of both the issue and the personalities involved. It's the kind of analysis I favor, and it would make sense in looking at Libya. It would be useful to understand both the history of our relations with Qadhafi's regime as well as the history of Qadhafi himself.

You can learn a lot about the thinking of political leaders by looking at the great events they lived through and examining them in the context of their own recorded histories. Ronald Reagan, for example, has a quality of basic optimism. He got out of high school before the Great Depression, lived through those years and came out on the right side of things. A former Democrat, he was very much touched by the Roosevelt era and, I would argue, by the tough

and can-do foreign policy of Harry Truman and his Secretary of State, Dean Acheson. Understanding this about Mr. Reagan makes it possible to draw some inferences about how he might behave.

It's important for both allies and adversaries to go through this exercise. Though you can easily get it wrong, it's much better than simply defining people as "a pink-tea diplomat," "a military mind" or "an actor." Those labels are almost bound to be wrong.

The same historical analysis that is applied to individuals can be used in looking at organizations. I would guess that if we applied such an analysis right now to our military, diplomatic and CIA staffs in Central America, we would find that relatively slow-track people have been replaced by fast-track people with experience in Europe and Vietnam. Their primary reference points would not be Central or Latin America but the Soviet-American conflict. They are likely to know more about that conflict than about the area, which suggests that they might be seeing events differently than Latin American specialists would. That's a hypothesis using history worth digging into by those who have to evaluate the information and recommendations from these sources.

### When policymakers 'fail to use history at all'

Even worse than a failure by policymakers to use history systematically is their failure to use it at all, as the Carter administration did in 1979 when the CIA photographically "discovered" a Soviet brigade in Cuba. This got publicized by the late Senator Frank Church, who picked it up and fulminated against it. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance then said he would not be satisfied with the status quo. This occurred at the time the administration was trying to get SALT II ratified.

It turned out that the brigade had been in Cuba steadily since 1962 and had been photographed since then. But most of the aerial photographs were never developed and analyzed, and somehow the whole government lost knowledge of the fact the troops had been there for years. That's not even making elementary use of history; it's a total nonapplication.